Supplemental Trainer Materials

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Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children

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FOREWORD
by
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Children acquire language for expression and interpretation—to share with other people what their beliefs, their desires, and their feelings are about. Anyone who cares about children, therefore, has every reason to care about how they learn language. This book is about the circumstances of early language learning and is built around one central aspect of that learning: the words of the language. Virtually all children begin to acquire a vocabulary of words in the second year of life, usually soon after the first birthday. This means that a child's home and family provide the circumstances for the emergence of language and word learning. The book begins with the basic facts about the vocabularies of 42 children from the time they first began to say words at about 1 year until they were about 3 years old, and it then goes on to describe the interactions with other persons in their families that formed the contexts for their word learning.

The study is contextualized in the history of the War on Poverty and the authors' own intervention efforts in that war with low-income children in the 1960s. They meticulously document the rationale for the study in this book by recounting the several studies and intervention programs that preceded it. The description of their earlier efforts and the ensuing frustrations that accompanied the "failed" outcomes is an object lesson in how programmatic research should be developed and where the research ideas ought to come from. And at the end, they come back to their earlier findings and frustrations with new insights from this study with which to reconsider the earlier data. The whole thing reads like a detective story of the most serious academic kind.

We have long known that children differ greatly in when they begin to learn language and how fast they learn once they begin. The children in this study did indeed differ. Some began to learn words with a learning trajectory that took off like a small rocket. But other children, who may even have begun to say words at about the same age, were much slower to get off the ground, and their trajectories were forever in the shadow of the other children. Why? That is the central question in this book.

In answering the question, Hart and Risley discovered that some things don't matter. For example, race/ethnicity doesn't matter; gender doesn't matter; whether a child is the first in the family or born later also doesn't matter. But what does

matter, and it matters very much, is relative economic advantage. First, and this major theme sounds again and again in these pages to provide a baseline for what follows, children living in poverty, children born into middle-class homes, and children with professional parents all have the same kinds of everyday language experiences. They all hear talk about persons and things, about relationships, actions, and feelings, and about past and future events. And they all participate in interactions with others in which what they do is prompted, responded to, prohibited, or affirmed. But children in more economically privileged families hear some of these things more often, and others less often, than children in poverty and working-class homes. The differences between the families documented in this book were not in the kinds of experiences they provided their children but in the differing amounts of those experiences. The basic finding is that children who learn fewer words also have fewer experiences with words in interactions with other persons, and they are also children growing up in less economically advantaged homes.

Why do children differ so drastically in the trajectories of their word learning? It turns out that frequency matters. The powerful lesson to be learned in these pages is that even though they have the same kinds of experiences with language and interactions in their homes, children born into homes with fewer economic resources have fewer of these experiences. And the consequence is that they learn fewer words and acquire a vocabulary of words more slowly.

On the one hand, the importance of the frequency of experiences might not come as a surprise to many people; most theories of learning assume it. On the other hand, some very influential theories of language acquisition are built on the assumption that children need only hear something once in order to acquire it. A child might very well learn a word or some other aspect of language after hearing it only a single time. But the lesson in this book is clear: The more a child hears of one or another aspect of the language, the greater the opportunities the child has to learn it. Opportunities for learning are enhanced when children engage in many and varied interactions with other people, and individual families tend to be consistent in the opportunities they provide their children for such interactions over the crucial early years of language learning. As a result, some children learn more words than others, with a trajectory of word learning that takes off and flies, simply because they engage in many more interactions with language in their homes.

We certainly have known for a long time that children reared in poverty have far fewer opportunities for experiences of many kinds, language being just one of them. Other studies have pointed to one or another reason why that might be so. Parenting is a challenge in the best of circumstances, and being relatively undereducated and poor makes it that much harder. As parents are faced with the challenges and frustrations, many things have to give, social interactions and talk among them. Children in families with low incomes surely have still other quality experiences that are different from those quantified here—experiences that are

culturally valid and contribute in positive ways to their development. But they are evidently not having the experiences with language that enhance word learning in the early years.

The easy reaction to these findings would be "we already know" that children living in the lowest economic circumstances in this country do not have the same language experiences other children have. But I, for one, know of no one else who has done what Hart and Risley have done. They went into homes of 42 children, month after month, during the most crucial 2-year period in a child's language learning career. And carefully, conscientiously, sensitively, and thoroughly, they found out why the trajectories of word learning can differ so dramatically among different children.

Collecting data is relatively easy; anyone can follow a child around with a tape recorder or ask a parent to record a child's words in a diary or checklist of words. But collecting and processing a database of this quality from 42 families required a heroic effort. The main result concerning vocabulary acquisition may well be what many would have expected. However, the longitudinal data showing what was happening in these homes during the time of early vocabulary growth are a major contribution. And the finding is heartbreaking that by the time the children were 3 years old, parents in less economically favored circumstances had said fewer different words in their cumulative monthly vocabularies than had the children in the most economically advantaged families in the same period of time.

The authors do not stop there. They conclude by outlining an agenda for intervention that begins in the home and begins very early in a young child's life, with a focus on the social influences on language and its acquisition within the cultural context of the family. This book is making its appearance now, decades after the War on Poverty was joined, in a political climate filled with tension between genuine concern for poor children and strong dissatisfaction with our welfare system. But the clear message here is that the welfare of poor children can only be served by enhancing the experiences they receive at home—by making the vocabulary and language they will need for expression and interpretation, in the wider contexts of their lives, available to them from those who care for them and also care about them. I hope this book will find its way into the hands of everyone with an interest in children and concern for their present and future lives.

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Reference: Hart. B. & Risley, T. (1999). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children.* Baltimore: Paul Brookes Publishing Company.

Checklist

Language Module Assignments

Form Completed by Trainer _____ **Training Date(s)** _____

Please complete this form by listing the participant's first name and checking off assignments as completed.

	Language Module Assignments and Evaluation turned in			
Participant's First Name	L-11	L-12	L-14	Evaluation Completed